

THE QUALITIES OF GOOD MEN

IN THE OTTOMAN AND SAFFAVID EMPIRES

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Society expected certain qualities of the leaders and virtuous men of the Ottoman and Saffavid Empires: piety, wisdom, learning and knowledge, strength of will tempered by compassion, individual bravery and skill, public and private generosity, and a cultured, urbane demeanor. We can surmise that both Eskandar and Evliya intended their portrayals of Shah Abbas and Melek Ahmed Pasha to be exemplars for other men within the Empire. The authors admit few failings in these paragons, especially Eskandar. While both these men published their works in the seventeenth century, the qualities reflected within them might have lasted until the end of the nineteenth century, as Firhan Pasha's work seems to suggest.

The rulers of the Ottoman and Saffavid Empires no longer claimed the religious right to rule as had the Caliphs of the Umayyad or the Abbasids. However, their contemporaries expected the Sultans of the Ottomans, the Shahs of the Saffavids and all righteous men within their empires to be pious Muslims. Eskandar notes that "Shah 'Abbas was never remiss in seeking to approach God's throne"¹ and attributes much of the Shah's good fortune and the success of his policy-making to "divine inspiration."² To the West, piety was also an important factor in life. Evliya Celebi first impressed Köprülü Pasha with his recitations from the Koran and later employed Evliya to recite litanies and benedictions³. Indeed, throughout Evliya's work, the protagonists frequently praise God, and look to the Divine for assistance. Also,

like Ibn 'Abdun of Seville⁴, the Muslims in Bosnia appeared to be fiercely proud of their religion and utterly contemptuous of the Christians of the region, calling them "hell-destined infidels."⁵ Even centuries later, this prejudice can be seen in the attitude of the Jews of Baghdad to the coming to power of the Committee of Union and Progress in 1908. The Jews are relieved because they believe this will lead to an end to the "fanaticism" of the local Muslims and the "official sanctioning of its harassment of the Jews."⁶

Society expected both leaders and other men of virtue to be wise, intelligent and knowledgeable in their affairs. Eskandar describes Shah Abbas as showing "sound judgment in the everyday problems of this life" as well as possessing, and using, "intelligence and mother-wit".⁷ Abbas removed any potential enemies⁸, reformed the army⁹ and suppressed the activities of highway robbers¹⁰ bringing peace to the Saffavid Empire. Evliya seems to believe that Melek Ahmed Pasha showed similar good judgment in his management of the tensions between the soldiers of the frontier and his own troops, negotiating a compromise that satisfied both sides¹¹. However, raw intelligence and common sense were not enough: according to Firhan Pasha, a civilized (i.e. virtuous) man

¹ Monshi, Eskandar B, "Discourses," *History of Shah Abbas the Great*, translated by R. Savoy, 515.

² Ibid, 527.

³ Celebi, Evliya, "Governor of Bosnia (1659–60)," *The Intimate Life of an Ottoman Statesman*, translated by Robert Dankoff, 242.

⁴ Ibn 'Abdun, "The Markets of Seville," in *Islam from the Prophet Mohammed to the Capture of Constantinople*, ed. Bernard Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

⁵ Celebi, *Ottoman Statesman*, 245.

⁶ Franco, A, "Baghdadi Jews React to the Modernization of the Ottoman Empire, May 28, 1908," in *Sources in the History of the Modern Middle East*, ed. Akram Fouad Khater (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), 36.

⁷ Monshi, "Discourses," 517.

⁸ Ibid, 518

⁹ Ibid, 527

¹⁰ Ibid, 523

¹¹ Celebi, *Ottoman Statesman*, 247.

“must gather knowledge and develop commerce and other human necessities.”¹² Eskandar has Shah Abbas showing just such virtue, possessing impressive knowledge of both his own realm and the outside world¹³.

Society expected that the good ruler should use his wisdom to rule with regard to the welfare of his people, but needed to balance this compassion with the strength associated with despotism. The Sultan of the Ottoman Empire withdrew Seydi Ahmed Pasha as the governor of Bosnia because “he committed so much oppression”¹⁴ and Shah Abbas “was at pains to see that his people enjoyed peace and security, and that oppression by officialdom [...] was totally stamped out in his kingdom.”¹⁵ Yet in both cases, the authors describe later despotic behavior. Eskandar indeed praises Shah Abbas for his “sternness” and “severity” as he asserts his authority within his Empire, executing those who defy his will¹⁶. Melek Ahmed Pasha shows similar severity in his subjugation of the Serbian rebels¹⁷.

As well as being authoritative, a virtuous man and a good ruler should be individually courageous and physically capable. Both Evliya and Eskandar describe instances of bravery and skill by their subjects. Not only did Shah Abbas survive battles, but he also dealt personally with a Kurdish attacker, seizing the knife out of the man’s hand¹⁸. Melek Ahmed Pasha survived a similar attack by a Christian assassin. He “immediately seized his great and lusty sword, leaped lustily out of the grand pavilion, and the *uskok* such an angelic blow that the heavens were jealous.”¹⁹

The qualities required by society in a good man and leader were not only those of war and power, but also those of private and public virtue. Shah Abbas demanded

truthfulness in his subjects, saying “lying [...] is considered a sin by God” and a sign of ingratitude towards one’s lord²⁰. Compassion to others is also important. Firhan Pasha argues, “The human being has been commanded to protect those of his kind and treat them well, and is not commanded to do the opposite.” and considers the Bedouins’ failure to show compassion to others among their greatest failings.²¹ Eskandar portrays one of Shah Abbas’ “most agreeable qualities” as his having “natural generosity and magnanimity” to his personal servants and their families, in addition to his compassion towards his subjects²². Leaders were expected to be generous, both to individuals and to society as a whole. The Sultan of the Ottoman Empire gave Melek Ahmed Pasha a “princely gift indeed” upon Melek Pasha’s appointment as Governor of Bosnia²³. Eskandar illustrated the generosity of Shah Abbas on a wider scale: Abbas had “a natural inclination to charitable activities” and provided for many “splendid monuments” to be built in his realm²⁴.

Firhan Pasha argued that only urban men could be considered truly civilized²⁵, and certainly, good men and leaders showed culture, being both artistic and supportive of the arts. Eskandar describes Shah Abbas as being “well versed in Persian poetry”, a “skilled musician” and composer and an elegant and witty conversationalist²⁶. The Shah’s public buildings not only included mosques, schools, hospitals and reservoirs, but also golden palaces, beautiful gardens and well-appointed accommodations for artisans²⁷.

For hundreds of years, the men of the Saffavid and Ottoman Empires were expected to be pious, astute, authoritative, compassionate, brave, generous and cultured, much like Shah Abbas and, to a lesser extent Melek Ahmed Pasha, were in the seventeenth century. Eskandar and Evliya submitted these men as examples for others,

¹² Firhan Pasha, “An Ottoman Government Decree Defines the Official Notion of the Modern Citizen,” in *Sources in the History of the Modern Middle East*, ed. Akram Fouad Khater (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), 19.

¹³ Monshi, “Discourses,” 533.

¹⁴ Celebi, *Ottoman Statesman*, 237.

¹⁵ Monshi, “Discourses,” 523.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 526.

¹⁷ Celebi, *Ottoman Statesman*, 247.

¹⁸ Monshi, “Discourses,” 522.

¹⁹ Celebi, *Ottoman Statesman*, 251.

²⁰ Monshi, “Discourses,” 529.

²¹ Firhan Pasha, “Modern Citizen”, 20.

²² Monshi, “Discourses,” 531.

²³ Celebi, *Ottoman Statesman*, 238.

²⁴ Monshi, “Discourses,” 535.

²⁵ Firhan Pasha, “Modern Citizen”, 19.

²⁶ Monshi, “Discourses,” 533.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 536–7.

and the characteristics remained prominent until the nineteenth century when the pressures for modernization began to challenge some of these assumptions of virtue.

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